



HRSP NEWSLETTER

U.S. Department of Justice, Criminal Division, Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section

August 2018

Alleged Ethiopian Human Rights Abuser Arrested for Fraudulently Obtaining U.S. Citizenship

On August 17, Mergia Negussie Habteyes, a naturalized U.S. citizen residing in Alexandria, Virginia, was arrested by special agents of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) after being indicted on felony charges of having fraudulently obtained U.S. citizenship. On August 24, following a detention hearing, U.S. Magistrate Judge Theresa C. Buchanan of the Eastern District of Virginia determined Negussie to be a flight risk and ordered him detained pending trial.

Negussie, 58, is charged in an indictment, which was returned by a grand jury sitting in the Eastern District of Virginia on Aug. 16, alleging that he told a series of lies to U.S. immigration authorities in the course of obtaining authority to enter the United States as a refugee, subsequently obtaining lawful permanent resident status, and ultimately obtaining U.S. citizenship.

Specifically, the indictment asserts that, when he applied for naturalization in the United States, Negussie falsely stated that he never persecuted persons because of their political opinion, and he failed to disclose that he had committed a crime or offense for which he was not arrested. In fact, according to the indictment, Negussie served as a civilian interrogator in the Higher 3 prison in Ethiopia in the late 1970s, during a period known as the Red Terror. In that role, Negussie is alleged to have participated in the persecution of individuals imprisoned because of their political opinion. Additionally, Negussie falsely stated that he never gave false or misleading information to any U.S. government official while applying for any immigration benefit and that he never lied to U.S. immigration authorities to gain entry or admission into the United States and to obtain immigration benefits.

"Negussie allegedly concealed his role in persecuting Ethiopian prisoners for their political opinions during that country's so-called Red Terror period when he applied for, and ultimately obtained, U.S. citizenship," said Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski of the Justice Department's Criminal Division. "As this case demonstrates, the Justice Department will not allow the United States to become a safe haven for human rights violators, and we will continue to aggressively prosecute those who seek to exploit our immigration system through fraud and deceit."

"Negussie sought to outrun his past by allegedly employing deception to fraudulently obtain United States citizenship," said U.S. Attorney G. Zachary Terwilliger of the Eastern District of Virginia. "This indictment reflects the government's dedication to investigating and prosecuting criminal immigration cases, including those involving alleged human rights violators."

If convicted, Negussie faces up to 10 years in federal prison. Conviction would also result in automatic revocation of Negussie's U.S. citizenship as well as likely removal to Ethiopia.

The charges in the indictment are merely accusations, and the defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

The case is being investigated by HSI with the support of the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Center (HRVWCC). The HRVWCC is comprised of ICE HSI's Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit, ICE's Human Rights Law Section, FBI's International Human Rights Unit and DOJ's Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section (HRSP). The case is being jointly prosecuted by HRSP Trial Attorney Jamie Perry and Assistant U.S. Attorney Alexander Blanchard of the Eastern District of Virginia.

Members of the public who have information about former human rights violators in the United States are urged to contact U.S. law enforcement through the Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section at toll-free [1-800-813-5863](tel:1-800-813-5863), or through the HSI tip line at [1-866-DHS-2-ICE](tel:1-866-DHS-2-ICE) or its online tip form at www.ice.gov/exec/forms/hsi-tips/tips.asp.

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